

## I-73 gets key approval from state, federal officials

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By Terry Ward

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The process to build Interstate 73 moved an inch forward Thursday when the Environmental Impact Statement related to the building of the southern portion of the proposed interstate was finalized by state and federal officials.

Finalizing the Environmental Impact Statement allows for the process of acquiring right-of-ways to begin.

The southern portion of I-73 would run from Interstate 95 in Dillon County through Marion County to S.C. 22 (Veterans Highway) in Horry County.

The final Environmental Impact Statement was signed by S.C. Secretary of Transportation H.B. "Buck" Limehouse Jr. and Federal Highway Administration Division Administrator Bob Lee.

In a press release, Limehouse said finalizing the document represents "the most significant milestone achieved to date for I-73."

U.S. Rep Henry Brown, R-S.C., also described in a press release finalization of the Environmental Impact Statement as a significant step toward the construction of I-73.

Mitchell Metts, the SCDOT's I-73 project manager, said getting environmental approval for the southern portion allows for the focus to turn to acquiring funding to build I-73.

The interstate is estimated to cost \$2 billion to build. So far, about \$100 million — almost all from federal sources — has been identified to fund I-73.

The interstate could take up to 10 years to build, but officials are hoping the process can be expedited. The project has been put on a fast track by the SCDOT, which named it the state's No. 1 transportation priority.

In keeping with the theme that I-73 planners have adopted, the Environmental Impact Statement was completed in less time than it would normally take.

"The national average for approval of an environmental document of this magnitude is five to six years, but because of the partnerships in South Carolina, we were able to accomplish this milestone in a little over three years," Lee said in the release.

Metts said it was an ambitious goal to get the environmental study completed in the time it was done.

“We started with a blank map,” he said. “We conducted public meetings and listened to feedback from people to see where it led us.”

Meetings with various agencies and environmental interests were conducted, as well. “We’ve had 25 separate, day-long meetings to discuss the plan. I feel we have a solid document that we can move forward with,” Metts said.

One of the most controversial challenges in finalizing the Environmental Impact Statement for the southern portion of the I-73 involved a deal with the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Trust. The path of I-73 crosses the Little Pee Dee River on S.C. 917. To build the interstate, planners needed to use 30 acres on the banks of the Little Pee Dee River.

SCDOT and the Little Pee Dee River Heritage Trust officials voted earlier this year to take 300 acres from the state in a 10-to-1 swap for the land on the Little Pee slated to be used for I-73. Approval from the S.C. Budget and Control Board is pending.

Metts said finalization on the Environmental Impact Study for the northern corridor of I-73, from North Carolina to I-95 in Dillon County, is expected this spring.

The interstate, if it is built, ultimately will run from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. It will cross six states — Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and the Carolinas — and traverse 60 miles in Marlboro, Dillon, Marion and Horry counties.

The interstate is No. 5 on the U.S. Department of Transportation’s list of priority roads. For information on the proposed route for I-73 in the Palmetto State, visit [www.I73inSC.com](http://www.I73inSC.com).